

LEGACY OF JOSEPH PAPP

By Helen Epstein

(slide 1: Paul Davis poster of Joe)

I first met Joseph Papp in the winter of 1976. I was 29, a freelance reporter on assignment for the New York Times. Joe was 55 (*Slide 2*) and head of what at the time was the most famous theatrical institution in the United States.

I spent weeks scouring the archives and interviewing the performers and staff of the New York Shakespeare Festival. Then Joe—who had once wanted to be a reporter and had a genius for working with the press—suggested that I tour all his productions in one evening—by motorcycle.

The Delacorte was closed for the winter but there were seven shows playing in three other New York Shakespeare Festival venues. At 7:30 in the Public Theater, David Langston Smyrl's prison musical *On the Lock-In* began the tour, followed by John Guare's *Marco Polo Sings a Solo*; and David Rudkin's (*slide 3*) *Ashes*.

At eight, a stage manager drove me up to Lincoln Center. In the Vivian Beaumont Theater, (*slide 4*) Andrei Serban's production of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* was beginning Act 2, while downstairs, at the Newhouse, audiences sat riveted by Mike Nichols' production of David Rabe's *Streamers*. Then we motocycled back down Broadway to the theaters where (*slide 5*) five African-American women in Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls* were dancing off the stage and another group of dancers were finishing up (*slide 6*) *A Chorus Line*.

Since its establishment in the mid-1950s Joe's theater had become so much a part of city life that it was hard to imagine a time when it hadn't existed. (*slide 7*) In just over twenty years, due to the success of *A Chorus Line*, the operating budget of the New York Shakespeare Festival had swollen to the size of well-endowed and long-established Lincoln Center giants like the New York Philharmonic and the Metropolitan Opera (*slide 8*). But its staff and offerings looked nothing like theirs. The Festival's audience came from every stratum of New York society. Its headquarters were not uptown but off the beaten track, in the then-shabby neighborhood of Astor Place. Joe had aligned his Festival with an architectural movement called "adaptive reuse." In 1966, he had saved New York's first public library from demolition and transformed it into the Public Theater (*slide 9*).

My generation of New York City kids had grown up regarding Joe Papp as a

local hero, a kind of urban Robin Hood. (*slide 10*) In grammar school, we were bussed to the Hecksher Theater to see Free Shakespeare. In high school, we listened to him speak at Assembly. As we grew up, New York City mayors Robert Wagner, John Lindsay, Abe Beame, Ed Koch, and David Dinkins came and went; American Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan and Bush came and went; dozens of New York City parks commissioners, theater critics, and entire newspapers came and went, but Joe Papp remained, as essential a cultural phenomenon as every Sunday's Al Hirschfeld theater cartoon (*slide 11*).

So it was with some trepidation that I prepared to spend an entire day with him. From 9 in the morning until 9 at night, I was to watch him work, holding meetings, talking on the telephone, giving notes to directors. Finally, we'd have a long interview. Like dozens of reporters before and after me, I found him unorthodox and a lot of fun. He asked me to drop the "Mr. Papp", changed subjects when they bored him, reversed our roles by asking me what I thought about things. He was warm but unexpectedly reserved, playful, unpretentious. Right away, I sensed what actress Ellen Holly called his "perfect pitch in dealing with women." Ms. Holly, who worked regularly at the Festival in the 1960s, later told me that he had made her feel beautiful and gifted, without the innuendo or undercurrent of sexual abuse so frequent in show business among both men and women in power; that she felt safe to do her best and most personal work.

I must have felt that too because I didn't think twice when, at the end of twelve hours, Joe invited me home for dinner. As we headed toward 9th St, I just struggled to match his stride, and to remember the endlessly quotable things he was saying. When we arrived, I was startled first by the modesty of his building, then by the modesty of his two-bedroom apartment. His wife, head of the Play Development Department Gail Merrifield, met us at the door. What I saw next was beyond startling. The dinner table set with candalaria and flowers. It was the Papps' first wedding anniversary (*slide 12*).

Thirty years later, I see my intro to Joe as typical. His oncologist once told me that having Joe as a patient was like playing basketball with a pro. You were inspired to do your best, to pay attention to your intuition as well as intellect, and to be prepared to turn on a dime. That first evening and many times afterward, I realized that Joe's living room was an extension of his theater and that his theater was his home. I learned that Joe was fearless but also fearful, an extraordinarily driven and complicated man who had suffered from anxiety attacks and bouts of depression since childhood.

Although Joe discouraged his playwrights from entering psychoanalysis, for fear

it would dry up their writing, Joe himself was in therapy—much of it psychoanalytic—for more than twenty years. The unlikely trio of Freud, Marx, and Shakespeare most strongly influenced Joe's worldview and the theater he built.

"Critics often claim that I have no central aesthetic," Joe once wrote, "but my central idea had always been to provide access to the best human endeavor to the greatest number of people. I believe that great art is for everyone. When I go into East Harlem or Bedford Stuyvesant and see the kids who come to our shows I see nothing so clearly as myself."

(*slide 13*) The boy who became Joe Papp was born Joseph Papirofsky in a tenement of Williamsburg, Brooklyn on June 22, 1921, long before it was dotted with art galleries, cafes or condos, and before it became a Chassidic enclave. In the 1920s, Williamsburg was one of NYC's poorest neighborhoods, home to a mix of Irish, Jews, Italians, African-Americans, Ukrainians, Poles, and Arabic-speakers whom Joe remembered calling "Mohammedans."

When most people imagine Jewish family life, they recall scenes from the work of Neil Simon or Woody Allen or Philip Roth. Joe's family life was closer to narratives by Henry Roth, Anzia Yezierska and Michael Gold (*slide 14*). There was no overprotective mother, no rich or distinguished relatives, no community of nosy friends. Joe's parents, Shmuel and Yetta Papirofsky were uneducated immigrants – she from Kovno, Lithuania; he, from Kielce, Poland, orthodox Jews who spoke in Yiddish.

Yetta Papirofsky could neither read nor write, suffered from a variety of physical ailments and what was probably clinical depression; Shmuel or Sam Papirofsky liked to sing and worked as a trunk maker. They had four children –two boys, two girls – who, by their account, raised themselves. Joe, the second eldest and first son, early on, spent most of his time in the streets.

Although many children who grow up poor get out and never look back, Joe retained a loyalty to the world of his working-class childhood (*slide 15*).

"New York's prime energy has always come from the bottom of the heap," he wrote fifty years later. "The Irish after the potato famine, the Italians, the Jews. And long before any of them arrived, the blacks who have always given the city its vitality. Now the Puerto Ricans with their color and rhythm. I am a part of these people and share their aspirations for a better life. As Shakespeare wisely said, "The city is the people." I say Amen to that."

Joe had no illusions, however, about "the people's" prejudices or their capacity for violence. Self-defense was one of the formative lessons of his childhood (*slide 16*).

"By the time I was in high school," he said, "I'd beaten up and gotten beaten up by all kinds of people. There was an Arab called The Crutch. There was Jetta an Italian girl, and Eustace Baily a big fat black guy who beat the hell out of me. But with all of them, no matter how hard you were hit, you never had a sense it was meant personally. Whitey was different."

Whitey was Irish, three years older, and impossible to avoid because he lived downstairs. When Joe was 14, Whitey punched him in the face so hard that he drew blood. "I've always remembered the shock of it," Joe said. "what it did to me psychologically. He showed no hesitation or remorse. He provided my first encounter with quintessential violence, which I would later connect to Nazism and fascism. But that was only the first part: the second was that my father was standing there and couldn't help me. I felt crushed by Whitey and I saw my father was crushed too. He acted like a European Jew after a pogrom: he packed his bags."

The Papirofskys moved to Brownsville.

Joe later pointed out that Whitey's attack had taken place in 1935, "a dramatic time for any child," as he said, "but particularly a Jewish child. My father's family was stuck in Poland. The world seemed polarized between the Fascist states on one hand and the wishy-washy western democracies on the other." In that context, Whitey's attack taught him that it was crucial to be hypervigilant and pre-emptive, to hit first and hit hard, but also to build alliances with like-minded people who resisted bullies, whether they came in human or institutional form.

The consequences of those lessons can be seen in Joe's endless battles with foundation and government officials over money, with theater critics over reviews, with the CBS television network over David Rabe's play *Sticks and Bones*. Famously arrested at an anti-war protest in Washington 1972 (*slide 17*), he was still marching in 1989, although he was gravely ill, against the restrictions that political conservatives imposed on National Endowment for the Arts grants to artists (*slide 18*)

Another key incident in Joe's childhood had to do with tickets of admission and took place within the context of the Jewish community. (*slide 19*) Before his voice changed, a man came to Williamsburg looking for a boy soloist for High Holiday services in an upscale synagogue. Joe would be trained, given subway fare to rehearsals, and paid for singing. All went well until the evening of services. At the

synagogue door, father and son were asked for their tickets. As a performer, Joe was allowed in free but his father was told he needed to pay. After much to-do, the father was allowed entrance but the injustice, and the gap between Jews with money and Jews with none, was something Joe never forgot.

Today, when privatization has become the way to go and the gap between rich and poor has become as blatantly wide as it was in the 1920s, it's important to adjust our sociological frame and highlight the crucial role that free public institutions played in Joe's life.

The first was the New York City Parks system. (*slide 20*) Joe's earliest years were spent in Lindsey Park. A typical urban playground of its time, Lindsey Park offered a protected space in which neighborhood children could play. Greener space could be found in Prospect Park where Joe's father took his children to hear concerts by the Goldman Band (*slide 21*). Founded by a Metropolitan opera orchestra horn player, the band played a mix of operatic and symphonic classics as well as American popular music. The concerts were free.

A second free public institution was the Bushwick Public Library (*slide 22*). It was crowded at home and, especially in cold weather, Joe spent hours in the public reading room, reading his way through Tom Swift, Dickens, Shakespeare and the turn-of-the-century muckrakers – again, a mix of high and what was then regarded as low culture, reading that was self-directed and driven by curiosity rather than imposed by his teachers.

The third and most formative influence in Joe's childhood was New York City's public school system culminating with Eastern District High School (*slide 23*). Alfred Kazin, a Brownsville boy six years older than Joe, described the education of the time in this way:

"Our families and teachers seemed tacitly agreed that we were somehow to be a little ashamed of what we were...A refined, correct, nice English was required of us at school that we did not naturally speak and that our teachers could never be quite sure that we would keep...This English was peculiarly the language of advancement...it was bright and clean and polished. We were expected to show it off like a pair of new shoes. When the teacher called a question out, you were expected to leap up, face the class, and eject those new words fluently off the tongue."

Joe Papirofsky excelled at memorizing ditties, poems, and speeches that he still enunciated to perfection in his sixties. He was a favorite of his teachers, many of them bright, artistic women for whom, in the 1920s and 1930s, a teaching career was

the only road to independence. A Miss McKay provided Joe's first encounter with Shakespeare when she assigned her 8th grade class a speech from *Julius Caesar* and Joe wound up memorizing several of them. But it was Miss Eulalie Spence (*slide 24*) whom Joe talked about for the rest of his life. Miss Spence was his English teacher and advisor to the Dramatics Society of which Joe was president. Miss Spence was a poet, a published playwright, and African-American. "She called me Joseph, and boy did you hear the 'ph'." the producer would later say. "Although she never said it in words, she had that look in her eye which meant: there are goals for you."

Nonetheless, after high school, Joe did not go to college. He worked in a series of dead-end jobs until November of 1942, when a fourth public institution—the United States Navy—would change his life (*slide 25*).

If there hadn't been a war, Joe Papp often said, he would never have wound up in the theater. As a Chief Petty Officer, Joe Papirofsky worked on an aircraft carrier where he put together entertainments. They can best be described as variety shows in which he stole bits from various sources, served as M. C. and directed men he would have never met in New York. (*slide 26*) One was Bob Fosse, shown holding a clarinet. Joe cast him in "Tough Situation" or "T.S." a song and dance show that featured the two of them in drag, lip-synching to the Andrews Sisters. "TS" ran for 96 performances in the Pacific before closing in New York's Brooklyn Navy Yard.

That all but accidental entry into theater was followed by its opposite: 3 1/2 years at the ideologically-driven, not-for-profit Actor's Lab. The Lab was a theater and acting school in Los Angeles influenced by the Group Theater that accepted veterans under the G.I. Bill as well as starlets such as Joe's classmate Marilyn Monroe. Joe decided against becoming an actor, but, as a committed Communist, taught acting to racially-integrated classes at the California Labor School (*slide 27 Joe is on L*).

The Lab offered Joe Papirofsky a full apprenticeship in not-for-profit theater. He met many theater people there who sooner or later became very important to him including Bernard Gersten who later became his Associate Producer. (*Slide 28—On this slide from the Actor's Lab in the late 1940s Joe is second from L; Bernie Gersten is 4th from R*). He worked as a ticket-taker, production assistant, janitor, fundraiser and publicist, writing press releases and publishing an in-house newspaper while watching legendary actors, learning repertoire and noting how ego, personal politics, disorganization and lack of funds could wreck an institution "Theater is as personal as a garden," he would later write. "It cannot be run by committees or boards. You have to cultivate it yourself."

Unbeknownst to Joe, the Lab was being monitored by the FBI (slide 29 of FBI file). In 1948, the House UnAmerican Activities Committee (*slide 30*) branded the Lab a Communist-front organization and named several of its Board members Communists. Just as it had done to Hallie Flanagan's short-lived Federal Theater a decade earlier, HUAC brought an end to the Lab. In short order, the IRS revoked the Lab's tax-exempt status; studios pulled their starlets out; the Veterans Administration announced that the GI Bill no longer covered tuition. Scared off, audiences stopped coming to shows. In May of 1950, when he was 28, Joe locked up its doors.

Although not blacklisted, Joe was an open and active Communist. (*slide 31*) He had first been attracted to the Party as a teenager during the Depression. "The word 'communist' which sounds so reprehensible to many people today, was—to me—a beautiful word," he told me once. "It represented fearlessness, changing abysmal living conditions, creating a world free of social injustice. I'll always feel indebted to Russia for what they did during the Second World War. For a year and a half they were fighting alone. The Germans came within ten miles of Moscow."

With the Lab closed down, Joe was out of work. He joined a road company of *Death of a Salesman* that, at the beginning of 1951, ended in New York City. Like several of his former colleagues at the Lab, he found a day job at CBS television.

(*slide 32*) Although it sounds like an oxymoron, the first decade of television was its Golden Age. Based in New York, the networks produced dozens of weekly live broadcasts like *The Ed Sullivan Show* and quiz shows like *I've Got A Secret*, for which Joe worked as a stage manager. Theater scholar Rob Marx points out that he must have been *highly regarded*, for when CBS commissioned Rodgers and Hammerstein to make a musical out of *Cinderella*, starring Julie Andrews, Joe was chosen as its stage manager. He was quick, hard-working, and efficient, but what his colleagues later remembered really set him apart was Joe Paprifosky's obsession with Shakespeare. They remember Joe peppering his conversation with Shakespearean phrases the way religious people quote scripture, reciting entire scenes from the plays, and steering conversation to the ways he might direct plays.

Many theater groups were starting up in church basements during those post-war years. Off-Broadway had become so vibrant that, in 1950, Actor's Equity had established special union regulations for performers working outside the official theater district. Other Shakespeare Festivals were also started up in the 1950s, notably one in Stratford, Connecticut, with \$600,000 in funding, half from the Rockefeller Foundation.

Joe had no foundation contacts, no network of rich or powerful friends. (*slide 33 of Joe's face*) But he was so idealistic, passionate and energetic that, throughout his life, he attracted a loyal following of men and women. Although his dark good looks didn't hurt, what press agent Merle Debuskey remembered as most attractive in the early 1950s was the quantity of Joe's ideas. "Joe was always a fountain of ideas," he told me, "If 99 percent of them didn't pan out, at least one or two did."

Some of those ideas seem standard or obvious now and some had been attempted before but during the eight conservative years of the Eisenhower Administration they appeared new, unusual and controversial.

One was to obtain a educational charter for his theater from the New York State Board of Education. Some actors and directors viewed this as unprofessional, but Joe thought that the California Board of Regents charter had given the Actor's Lab cachet and a clear non-commercial base. "I wanted to reach audiences who might never have seen a play before and who were unable or unwilling to pay," he wrote. He believed that seeing a play by Shakespeare should be as easy as walking into a neighborhood library and reading one. For that reason the Reverend Clarence Boyer of Emmanuel Church agreed to let him use the Sunday School room of his church on East 6th Street and Avenue D for free. (*slide 34*)

A second controversial idea was non-traditional casting. In the early 1950s, when American artists and musicians were breaking away from European models, much of American theater still took its cues from Britain. If you were a white Midwestern man with no connections, or a large-boned Irish woman like Colleen Dewhurst, your chances in New York theater were slim. If you were a person of color, your prospects were even slimmer. So when in 1952—two years before *Brown vs. Board of Education*, Joe cast two black men in a Sean O'Casey one-act, some people were appalled, others found it inspiring, but everyone was startled,

Most important at a time when theater was largely class-bound, was the idea that Joe would insist on for the rest of his life—the idea of theater as a municipal service as essential as garbage collection. "There's a reason that theater is called show business," he later wrote. "A business must stay out of the red to exist. I am trying to build a theater on the bedrock of civic responsibility—not on the quicksands of show business economics...."

Joe was a constant walker in the city. In 1955, on one of his walks, he had discovered the East River Amphitheater, a 2000-seat space between the Williamsburg and Manhattan bridges. Audiences at Emmanuel Church were small and Joe thought that, maybe, he'd draw better numbers outdoors. The East River Amphitheater was

administered by the New York City Parks Department. Joe applied for and received a permit to use it. Working with director Stuart Vaughan, he marshaled his friends to work for no pay on two productions. (*slide 35*) In the summer of 1956, the New York Shakespeare Festival offered *Julius Caesar* for free and thousands of neighborhood people showed up, as did reporters from *Variety* and the *Village Voice*. He followed it with *Taming of the Shrew* and, after he staged a sit-in at the New York Times, reporter Arthur Gelb agreed to come down and see it.

Gelb later became cultural editor of the Times and a major Papp ally; back then, his review launched not only the New York Shakespeare Festival but the careers of actors Colleen Dewhurst, then working as a switchboard operator (*slide 36 of Joe and Dewhurst*) and Roscoe Lee Browne, then doing PR for a liquor company. That summer of 1956, 25,000 people saw Shakespeare produced on a shoestring budget of \$2000 but Joe was already thinking about expanding his operation to a Mobile Theater that he could drive into poor sections of the five boroughs.

For that first Mobile Theater, (*slide 37*) Joe solicited and received help from Deputy Mayor Stanley Lowell who obtained grants in aid not only from the Parks Department but from the Department of Gas and Electricity; the Department of Sanitation; the Department of Public Events; the Department of Civil Defense; the Department of Welfare and the municipal radio station, WNYC. The Mobile toured the boroughs in June of 1957, but had so many problems that, after less than a month, Joe changed his mind and wrote a memo to the Parks Department that he planned to play in Central Park for the duration of the summer. Late one night in July he drove the Mobile, attached to a New York Sanitation Department truck into Central Park and parked beneath Belvedere Castle (*slide 38*). Free Shakespeare has played there ever since.

In the fall, Joe moved into the Hecksher Children's Center theater at Fifth Avenue and 104th Street that the City's Department of Welfare let him use for free. Still holding down his day job at CBS, he produced *Richard III* there and continued to fund-raise, writing hundreds of letters to private and public agencies. He still had no network and got few responses. The Parks Department gave him a permit to use the Central Park site for another summer, but the Board of Estimate refused to give him any money. In fact, the Festival was already on a collision course with Parks Commissioner Robert Moses but Joe did not yet know it.

What he had become aware of in the spring of 1958, was that the FBI was trailing him as he hurried between the Hecksher and home and CBS, where he was stage managing the popular quiz show *I've Got a Secret* (*slide 39*). And he knew it was only a matter of time until he received a subpoena from the House Committee on

Unamerican Activities which had turned its attention to the powerful new medium of television.

Looking back in the 1980s, Joe told me that during his Lab days he had witnessed the spectacle of actors naming names and was sure he would not do so. But that spring as he prepared for the summer production of *Othello*, he wondered how he would do under pressure.

In his testimony of June 19, 1958 Joe Papirofsky, WW II veteran and producer of Free Shakespeare, invoked the Fifth Amendment twelve times. CBS fired him the same day, but in a highly unusual move, Joe appealed to his union to sue CBS and won. That summer, although the Board of Estimate still refused to give the Festival funding, Joe was able to parlay some of the attendant publicity into private contributions and although he had regained his job, decided to quit and work at the Shakespeare Festival full-time.

The HUAC episode turned out to be minor compared to the David-and-Goliath saga that followed. When Joe parked his Mobile Theater in Central Park in 1957, he had invaded the territory of (*slide 40*) Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, the most powerful non-elected official in the United States. Moses was 70 years old and a major power broker, responsible for constructing most of New York's highways, parkways, public beaches, state parks and, coincidentally, the East River Amphitheater. Yale-educated, the son of wealthy German Jews, Moses viewed the 37-year-old, eastern-European Papirofsky as a Commie squatter. When in the spring of 1959, Joe requested his annual summer park permit for Free Shakespeare, Moses refused to issue one unless the producer charged admission.

"Considerable park acreage is being damaged for your operation," Moses wrote. "Serious erosion problems will soon face us unless the area is paved ... Unless you are prepared to charge admission... we cannot give you a permit to operate in the City Park system."

Moses gave Joe his lucky break. For two months in the spring of 1959, many of the city's television, and radio stations and all seven major newspapers were the arena for a media battle over Free Shakespeare. They ran headlines such as ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE BUT HOW ABOUT THE PARK? A "We Want Will" Committee opened an office on Fifth Avenue. Coached by his long-time associate press agent Merle Debuskey, (*slide 41*) Joe was given an open mike where he made stirring statements like "No charge is made for library books. If people had to pay, most of the books would gather dust on the shelves. Why should theater be different?" When Commissioner Moses refused to back down, Joe consulted with his

pro bono counsel at the law firm of Paul, Weiss and the Festival brought suit against Commissioner Moses for abusing the power of a public administrator. The judge ruled for Moses but on appeal, the state Appellate Division voted 5-0 for the Festival, finding the Commissioner's actions "arbitrary, capricious and unreasonable."

With his customary shrewdness and speed, Joe offered the Commissioner a graceful way out of defeat by immediately suggesting they jointly request \$20,000 from the Board of Estimate. The Commissioner did so the following day. Although he adamantly refused to speak or meet with Joseph Papp, as he was now known, Moses subsequently asked the New York City Planning Commission to allocate one quarter of a million dollars for the construction of a Central Park amphitheater. (*slide 42*).

By 1965, Joe had attracted a core staff so committed to him and Free Shakespeare that they were willing to live on subsistence salaries. He also had a pool of what he called "blood-and-guts actors," including George C Scott and James Earl Jones (*slide 43*) who viewed the Festival as their artistic home. During the fifties and sixties, hundreds of other theater people like composer David Amram (*slide 44*) got their basic training at the New York Shakespeare Festival and, when they moved on, spread Joe's ideas across the United States.

They were not all aware of the fragile and paradoxical nature of the enterprise. The more successful Free Shakespeare became, the more money it cost. And, unlike a Broadway producer, Joe did not earn back his investment but lost more money with each production. (*slide 45*) He had earned \$16,000 a year at CBS but felt he could afford to pay himself only \$10,000 at the Festival. At every performance, he came onstage to appeal for contributions. Although in public he said things like "Foundations and philanthropists exist to give away their money. I'm giving them an opportunity," in fact, begging for money year after year recalled his childhood poverty and was a constant source of humiliation. His anger sometimes erupted at foundation officials who were then almost always establishment WASPs. Ford Foundation director W. McNeil Lowry recalled in an oral history that at an interview with the Mellon Foundation, Joe had practically thrown the furniture at former Harvard President Nathan Pusey. "Mr. Pusey is not the type of person who is used to that kind of applicant," Lowry said in an oral history, "and thought he was dealing with a madman."

It was about that time that a well-wisher sent Joe (*slide 46*) a professional fundraiser who had raised millions of dollars for Jewish organizations. Herta and Paul Amirian was about ten years older than the producer and played Professor Higgins to his Eliza Doolittle. She moved the Festival staff into a hotel suite near Carnegie Hall, got Joe

invited to gatherings of New York's rich and famous, and coached him on his dress and behavior. "I saw he had a tremendous ego and would be difficult," she later recalled. "But he was an enchanting young man. He charmed me, and when you're fundraising, charm is important."

Mrs. Danis set up opportunities for Joe to charm many wealthy New Yorkers such as philanthropist Florence Anspacher shown here with socialite Judy Peabody (*slide 47*) and philanthropist LuEsther Mertz, shown here with Bernard Gersten, who had become Joe's Associate Producer (*slide 48*). The three women became major Festival supporters along with George Delacorte (*slide 49*) who had given his first big donation to the Parks Department but then funded a second Mobile Theater.

But even with his base in Central Park secured and with the Mobile touring the boroughs, Joe continued looking for what he called "a permanent home." One day, general manager Hilmar Sallee came in with a copy of the *New York Times* Real Estate section whose headline read: *Landmarks for Sale or the Wrecker's Ball*. One of the buildings was the former John Jacob Astor Library. (*slide 50*)

That year, 1965, two pieces of legislation were signed into law. One created the National Endowment for the Arts. The second created the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission and Joe saw an opportunity to utilize both in his quest for a year-round theater.

The Astor Library had a history particularly meaningful to him. It had been the city's first public reading room, open from 1854 until its collection moved to Fifth Avenue and 42nd St. Later, it was bought by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, or HIAS, which used it as a soup kitchen during the Depression and a processing center for Jewish refugees before and after the Holocaust.

When Joe and Bernie took the subway to Astor Place and rang the bell, an old man with a Yiddish accent opened the door. The interior was dark, the glass ceiling of the reading room boarded over, the space divided into tiny cubicles in which some 250,000 people had been processed or housed. "The place was littered with index cards and lists of people who never made it out," the producer would later say. "There were old prayer books and baby rattles. It looked like there had been a pogrom." Gersten and resident designer Ming Cho Lee pointed out that the building was far too large, that the subway could be heard in every part of it, that its price -- \$575,000 -- was beyond the means of an institution then paying \$800 per month rent. The most basic renovation would cost hundred of thousands of dollars. But Joe said: let's get the building; then we'll try to get the money. (*slide 51*)

When I asked him about that kind of thinking, Joe replied that any venture that requires change seems enormous at first. Although, in private, his anxiety attacks worsened, he tried to project a feisty and focused public image. “You deal with the moments just as though you were cutting a hole into the side of a mountain,” he said. “I know I sound like Teddy Roosevelt but this is true of all hard-thinking people who get things done.”

Hilmar Sallee, Joe’s oldest and most loyal employee, quit in protest over what he thought was a colossal mistake but he was alone. The acquisition of the Public Theater led to new opportunities and influential new allies. One was the glamorous new Mayor John Lindsay (slide 52). Another was the Venetian-born architect Giorgio Cavaglieri (slide 53), who saw the Public Theater as a teaching model for the adaptive reuse of historic buildings. A third was theater critic Robert Brustein (slide 54) who, in 1966, had just become the dean of the Yale School of Drama. He hired Joe to teach there, and it was at Yale that the producer who had never attended college himself met the cream of theater students as well as the cream of the avant-garde.

At Yale, Joe also shifted from a primary engagement with Shakespeare to an equal if not greater commitment to living playwrights. He focused his customary intensity on the plays not always to the delight of his directing students. “For Joe, theater was about the word,” one of his directors later told me. “Playwrights were the name of the game and we directors were their servitors.”

Joe looked for the same qualities in writers as in actors. “Blood and guts” he called it. This is the way he described David Rabe (slide 55) whose work he championed all his life: “There was something about him that was very pure. This all-American ex-football player with this bright modern mind that seemed to be dipped into some primordial past. He was both extremely articulate and difficult to follow. That quality imbued his plays and had a profound effect on me. He was the only white writer who wrote a black character that I believed and one of the few male writers who could really write women. He could articulate for the inarticulate, the people who are the most hurt by things. He taught me that an enigma is closer to life than any kind of explained thing and I became so connected with his plays that I felt I would protect them from anything. Producing his work was the most important thing I did at the Public Theater.”

When he began looking for playwrights in the mid-1960s, Joe relied on his gut reaction, which was completely unpredictable. When actress Ellen Holly brought him the work of Adrienne Kennedy, he commissioned the hallucinatory *Cities in Bezique* (slide 56). Although his staff was accustomed to surprises even they were astounded

when he decided to open the Public Theater with something called a rock musical, scrawled on some loose pages by Gerome Ragni whom he had met on the train to New Haven. (slide 57 of Gerry Ragni, James Rado and Galt MacDermot)). Its title was *Hair*.

Resident designer Ming Cho Lee kept asking director Jerry Freedman for the script and, unaccountably to him, being told it was irrelevant. (slide 58) “My approach,” he told me, “is to read the script and then decide: should the set be realistic or abstract? Should the materials be metal? Wood? granite? The director—Jerry Freedman—kept saying it didn’t matter and he was right. When I finally opened it, there—for two pages—was one word: Hair. Hair. Hair. Hair. Hair. Hair. Right down the page and the next too. I thought Joe had gone crazy. If there is a plot, it is so deconstructed that you cannot see it. I thought: this is beyond me. How do I design this show?”

The opening of *Hair* (slide 59) and what followed is, of course, theater history: the enormous output of productions that influenced not just the American musical but much of the course of contemporary American theater; the sheer numbers and high quality of playwrights, actors, designers, directors, and arts administrators who tested their wings in this building. The cross-pollination of high and pop culture, classical and avant-garde and a continual activist involvement in municipal and national affairs.

What Joe himself thought was most important were his playwrights. “Stanislavski was wrong,” he said. “When actors take creative control, or directors for that matter, theater is in trouble. The writer is the key person. Without playwrights, theater cannot begin to exist.”

The creators of plays that Joe produced defy categorization. They include: George Wolfe *and* Joanne Akalaitis (slide 60); Gretchen Cryer and David Henry Hwang (61); Wally Shawn *and* Ntozake Shange (62); Novella Nelson (63); Jason Miller, John Guare *and* David Rabe (64); Michael Bennett (64) Miguel Pinero *and* Tina Howe (66) Vaclav Havel (67), Liz Swados (68), the Bandit playwrights of the Booth Theater (69 L to R Thomas Babe, Pinero, Dennis Reardon, Michael Weller and John Ford Noonan); the playwrights of the Festival Latino (70), even a couple of “token” Brits (71) like Caryl Churchill and David Hare and Gilbert & Sullivan (72) Some of their plays came in to the Public finished; others, like *The Normal Heart* (73), went through more than twenty drafts with Festival staff. Whether or not a production received good reviews and especially when it did not, Joe assured the playwright that he or she had a permanent home in his theater.

“Try to find your satisfaction in the work itself.” he would tell writers and performers shattered by a vicious review (slide 74). “Theater is a collective effort. You have to have faith in yourself and the people with whom you are working. The work you do may not please everyone but you created something that did not exist before. The critic has created nothing. He or she would have no job without you. That basic fact can give you the stamina to withstand any criticism you receive.”

He defended his artists like a general his troops, (slide 75) not only because he wanted to protect them but, as Festival veteran, now TV programming executive Lynn Holst pointed out to me, but because he so despised the idea of a few powerful critics as cultural gatekeepers. “A public theater has a duty to criticize critics,” he said, “since the commercial theater is afraid of them.” He saw critics as stand-ins for his teenage nemesis Whitey and understood how deeply a vicious review could affect a playwright or performer, humiliating and paralyzing him or her like a blow. He called critic Clive Barnes in the middle of the night to give him back in kind what he had dished out in a review, tried to bar critic Walter Kerr from entering this theater and wrote letters to John Simon’s editor demanding that the critic be fired. “Mr. Simon’s recent denunciation of ugliness on the stage, referring primarily to actresses who are a little fat, or over sixteen, or perhaps betray some sign of warmth, is part of his crusade for perfection,” he wrote to the editor of *New York Magazine*. “Somewhere, way back, little John must have been criticized no end... To regain his loss of self-esteem, he became a theater critic and discovered his perfect foil – the artist.”

Joe died far too soon, at the age of 70, of advanced prostate cancer. When I think about his legacy, I think of him the way he appears in this photograph (76): speaking his mind intimately, even tenderly, and always without notes, to an extraordinarily varied array of people. As he grew more powerful and tired of his endless battles, he sometimes talked more than he listened. But when Joe listened, the person speaking had a sense not only of being understood, but being validated and of having Joe on their side. Sometimes, he couldn’t help or had nothing to say but, more often, in both his public and private modes, he was comforting, provocative, inspiring, and often galvanizing.

For a start, Joe galvanized the thousands of young men and women who over five decades apprenticed at the New York Shakespeare Festival, the way Joe had once apprenticed at the Actor’s Lab, propelling them into professional lives across the world and into many fields besides theater. Those people are his legacy. Then there are Festival audiences, (77) the hundred of thousands of people who over the years have attended Festival productions in the Park, on the Mobile, at Lincoln Center, on Broadway and in this building. Those people are his legacy. Then there are

the millions more, in the United States and overseas, who saw televised or filmed versions of work that originated at the Delacorte or Public Theater. Those people too are his legacy. Then there are all bureaucrats, officials and politicians whom he fought, angered and/or won over to his ideas—notably the New York City Board of Estimate, that voted 1971, to buy the Public Theater for \$2.6 million and lease it back to the Festival for \$1 per year. The actual numbers were the back story then—the point was the principle of civic responsibility for the arts.

(Last slide 78)

Today, when even the cultural pages of our newspapers treat money as if it were the main event and when idealism in any realm has become material for parody, it's essential to assume Joe's legacy ourselves, to recall how hard-won this theater was, how many risks were taken for and in it, how it pulsed with life. There is also the then-revolutionary model of how Joe used *A Chorus Line*, enabling a contemporary work to incubate for months in a non-commercial environment, making it an Off-Broadway success, persuading a funder to underwrite its move to Broadway, then ploughing the commercial profits back into a not-for-profit institution. Joe was not able to achieve that level of commercial success with any other work he produced but he never gave up trying and he created a producing strategy that is a national model.

Similarly, he broadened the range of work of not-for-profit theaters. Not everything produced at the Public was memorable but almost all of it, however flawed, was an attempt at the real thing. Tony Kushner, whose work Joe produced during the last year of his life, put it well when he wrote: "People stay away from the theater in America, in the hundreds of millions they stay away, because so much of it is just narcissism on the hoof, desperate, dumb and disengaged. Joe Papp was one of the few heroes this tawdry timid business, the American theater, has produced.

But Joe transcended the world of theater. Vietnam veterans knew him as a WW II veteran interested in the issues of MIAs and Agent Orange. Cambodians and other refugees knew him as an American who raised money to relieve their problems; people in Communist countries, as an American who tried to break a hole through the Iron Curtain. The Jewish community knew Joe Papp as a prodigal son who had struggled for years with his Jewish identity, even passing as a non-Jew for many years before returning to his Jewish roots. AIDs activists knew him not only as the heart-broken father whose youngest son died of the disease but as the despairing employer who had watched AIDs decimate his work force, killing his friend and artistic director Wilford Leach. Almost everyone looked to him as a person unafraid to say publicly what other people were thinking and who did what other people talked about but were afraid to do.

Emmett Foster, Joe's personal assistant and driver for eighteen years, was one of the many people for whom Joe served not only as mentor but exemplar. Joe encouraged him to make notes for a theater piece while waiting in the car between the producer's appointments. The result was *Emmett: A One-Mormon Show*, which was produced here at the Public in 1983. Like so many other personal assistants in this city, Emmett saw the best and worst of his employer and might have written one of the mean-spirited memoirs so fashionable in our time.

Instead he, like so many people who knew Joe, finds it valuable to remember his integrity and a kind of leadership missing in the world today. "A lot of people believe that one person can't make a difference, but Joe proved them wrong," he said. "Joe took huge chances for what he believed in and he *did* change the world."